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Examining the Discourse on Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract

Nuclear weapons and language - is there a connection? Linguistics is an established science, but what has it got to do with nuclear weapons? This article was inspired by several international disarmament negotiations where I noticed that diplomats work in a communicative reality related to the nuclear arms issue. But is anyone involved in this highly political process aware of the activity of that process of talking? Observations showed that the political problem around the issue of nuclear arms is often, among other things, a communication problem. There is a clear lack of research dealing with communicative aspects of the nuclear arms issue. This article is based on a preliminary empirical case study where officials from seven different countries (Austria, China, France, India, Israel, Japan and South Africa) were interviewed and asked to participate in a short association test. While every country has a particular way of perceiving and dealing with nuclear related issues, these interviews show that language is an essential element in constructing the social reality of nuclear disarmament.

Introduction

Nuclear weapons and language - is there a connection? Linguistics is an established science, but what has it got to do with nuclear weapons? This article was inspired by several international disarmament negotiations where I noticed that diplomats work in a communicative reality related to the nuclear arms issue. But is anyone involved in this highly political process aware of the activity of that process of talking? Observations showed that the political problem around the issue of nuclear arms is often, among other things, a communication problem. There is a clear lack of research dealing with communicative aspects of the nuclear arms issue.

One of the challenges of science is to look at everyday actions that are usually not questioned because they are so obvious. This article is based on a preliminary empirical case study where officials from seven different countries (Austria, China, France, India, Israel, Japan and South

Africa) were interviewed and asked to participate in a short association test. While every country has a particular way of perceiving and dealing with nuclear related issues, these interviews show that language is an essential element. Before presenting the results of the data I collected, I shall outline some basic theories and assumptions underlying the research.

Communication and Meaning

Word problems can be world problems. Communication is a social process involving individuals exchanging messages. Communication is always intentional, but the interactants are not always in the position to rationally control the intention of their communicative act (as in the case of body language, for example).¹ The problem and controversial element of this exchange is that all the interactants have to be familiar with the discourse used, otherwise the communication is not successful or leads to a misunderstanding.

The interpretation and understanding of messages is the result of the collective labour of a particular society. The social as well as cultural background of the interactants forms the key elements in the process of coding and decoding the discourse, which is basically done by the use of signs. Most signs are arbitrary; their value or significance depends largely on a sort of collective agreement of the society using them. Signs are not pre-established... and they do not possess some natural inner quality ... any event acting as a sign is a sign because it has meaning for someone and, as such it has semiotic materiality ...²

To examine the arbitrary nature of signs related to nuclear issues, an associative test was used. In the test, several commonly used terms related to nuclear arms were defined by officials from various cultural backgrounds. Not surprisingly, very different meanings were attributed to the same term.

Culture and Communication Are Inseparable

There is no culture without communication and no communication without culture. Culture in itself is difficult to define.³ Here I shall mainly refer to the following definition: Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand be considered as products of action, on the other hand as conditioning elements for further being.⁴

Culture understood in that sense underscores that the core of culture is communication. Communication as cultural practice is inseparable from the society using it. Nevertheless the importance of culture within communication must not be overestimated: culture forms the framework for communication but the choice of a particular utterance always lies with the individual.⁵

Culture or Cultures?

Of course, a distinction has to be drawn between a national culture and a diplomatic subculture. The international diplomatic culture can almost be regarded as a double cultural identity of the interactants.⁶ Undoubtedly influenced by their national identity, the officials I interviewed have gone through a process of adaptation to the international community that most of their compatriots have rarely experienced. A common international code has emerged through diplomatic language, decorum and protocol. In a way this can be seen as an informal adaptation to intercultural differences. But even when using the same language, different worldviews can be expressed and different meanings can be accorded to the same words.⁷

Communication, Culture and the Reality of Nuclear Arms

The public image of nuclear weapons is not very popular. Nuclear weapons are associated with collective suicide. A global nuclear war would mean complete devastation: no human being, no plant, no animal could survive. These are facts. But within the Conference on Disarmament it is impossible to talk about nuclear weapons in this sense. The facts are too frightening. The discourse on nuclear arms touches the limits of language and imagination.⁸ It is therefore unavoidable to create a different communicative reality, emphasizing other aspects of nuclear arms.⁹

Authors such as Foucault and Bourdieu all stress the fact that language is of predominant importance in the process of interpreting, understanding and perceiving reality. In this sense communication is a form of action that does not re-establish or re-create an already existing reality. Rather it is discourse itself that forms the perception of reality.¹⁰

Empirical Evidence

THE COUNTRIES

The seven countries involved in this study were chosen for a number of reasons. Each country has a particular attitude towards nuclear weapons, which is influenced by various cultural backgrounds, historical experiences, threat perceptions and very different understandings of national defence and security. For example, China and France are recognized nuclear-weapon states, whereas India has only recently joined the nuclear club. and does not hold any legal rights deriving from these weapons.

Although China and France are both members of the Security Council, their attitudes towards nuclear weapons have little in common; their political concepts and their cultural attitudes vary greatly too. As to Israel there is no official statement concerning the possession of nuclear weapons. But does that mean that nuclear weapons have no relevance for Israel's self-concept? South Africa too is in a very particular situation. The radical changes in the South African government, constitution and administration had very significant consequences for South Africa's defence policy, including the dismantlement of nuclear arms.

Japan is the only country that has actually suffered a nuclear weapon attack. While it has a very strong anti-nuclear policy, it nevertheless considers nuclear protection as an integral part of its national security. Austria is a small, neutral state situated in the centre of Europe. As a traditionally anti-nuclear nation, it is interesting to explore how nuclear weapons possessed by other countries are perceived, as well as how defence and national identity can be mastered and defined without nuclear weapons, with particular regard to the country's historical importance.

ASSOCIATION EXERCISE: ONE TERM, MANY MEANINGS

The strong interdependence of the attribution of meaning and cultural and social background has been outlined in the introduction. Let us now look at how the following terms were defined by officials of Austria, China, Japan, Israel and South Africa. The French and the Indian representatives did not participate in the association test. Clear connections between terminology and ideology, value systems and attitudes can be observed in the responses. Even the diplomatic culture became obvious in the things left unsaid.

Nuclear Power

The definitions offered by the officials ranged from .a state with nuclear capability. (Israel) to a future source of energy. (Japan). Of particular interest is the Chinese response outlining the fact that in Chinese, many different notions of power exist and that it is therefore not possible to give one definition, rather a range of various notions. An anti-nuclear attitude is obvious in the statements of South Africa and Austria: Positive in the sense that it is at the moment environmentally friendly, but the long-term disposal is a great problem. In South Africa we have mainly coal mine stations and that's a big pollutant... Austria: Nuclear powers are some few states of the contemporary world thinking they have to protect themselves with nuclear weapons and demand therefore more power.

Defence

Defence was mainly associated with the concept of sovereignty and seen as the right of a nation to protect itself from outside and unjustified attacks. Each state needs this capability ... weapons are needed in order to deter. (Israel); Defence is the legitimate right of every sovereign state. (Japan); It is necessary to protect oneself against unjustified attacks. (Austria); Being able to have a minimum amount of resources to protect your country from external threat. (South Africa). Even though the Chinese official insisted on the fact that the Chinese concept of defence differed strongly from Western views I did not really perceive a difference: I know defence could mean very different things in the U.S. or in Europe ... but it has a very positive connotation in China because of the Chinese concept of defending one's own territory..

Modernization

The majority of interviewees agreed that modernization is the step-by-step improvement of a system or the general conditions of life; as the Austrian delegate put it. Israel defined modernization as to occur ... in every field of life since we live in a dynamic world and you need to update your capability... The Chinese noted that modernization is something very positive... Contrary to other countries South Africa associated the term with basic development: Everybody has access to water and electricity and education.

Missiles

A very technical definition was given by Israel and China: .Not directly related to nuclear weapons, there exist conventional warheads, air-to-air warheads, land and rocket warheads. (Israel); To send arms with nuclear warheads. (China). South Africa and Austria viewed the term very differently: Very long objects that you can stick things in and that fall on people's heads, one of the more problematic issues we have to deal with in disarmament in the future. (South Africa); .Render it possible to send the evil to the enemy without risking human lives in one's own nation the modern military's method of globalization. (Austria). Japan highlighted that some mechanisms for restraining missile development are necessary.

Nuclear Winter

The expression nuclear winter is of particular interest. Completely different ideologies were expressed within the definition according to whether the nation in question had nuclear weapons or not: .The survivors will envy the dead. (Austria); the after effect of a nuclear war, when you are returning to the ice age, when you have destroyed everything, environment, ecology. (South Africa); I don't know what it means. Is it historical? There was a winter war between Russia and Finland. (Israel); Ordinary people would not know what it means. Only very few people know that. (China); Nothing specially related to nuclear winter. (Japan).

Nuclear War

The term nuclear war revealed similar definitions: .total destruction. (Austria); basically total alienation of the earth. (South Africa); Disaster of the world. (Israel); Hope not to happen. (Japan); People think that's something not so easy to handle. (China). Obviously non-nuclear-weapon states defined nuclear war very differently than nuclear-weapon and nuclear-weapon capable states.

Nuclear Test

The definition of nuclear test implied very different worldviews. In the Chinese context nuclear tests were seen in a rather contradictory way: they [nuclear tests] represented for many years something positive, but China committed itself to stopping nuclear testing, but even now the Chinese population has no negative associations related to nuclear testing, but of course the media discourages nuclear testing... Israel outlined that .only a few states have the capability to make nuclear tests, at present the rivalries between India and Pakistan pose a

big problem in that context.. Other comments included. I hope that this will not happen. (Japan); .Nuclear mushrooms and tunnels in the desert. (Austria); An unnecessary action. (South Africa).

The Interviews

The interviews showed similar results to the association test. A distinction can be drawn between the responses of non-nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-weapon states. South Africa holds a particular position. The official was the only one not to refer to the subject in terms of the Cold War. It seems that the nearly revolutionary change in its political system brought along a completely new language. Further research is suggested to investigate the correlation between the country's political situation and its new understanding and use of language.

General Themes Within the Discourses

DIPLOMATIC AND NATIONAL CULTURE

Some common features can be observed in the way the officials interviewed expressed themselves. On the non-verbal and paraverbal level the diplomats had a tendency to speak very slowly (especially Japan) and to think for some time before answering. Furthermore many officials answered questions without looking at the interviewer, closed their eyes during long periods of the interview (possibly in order to concentrate) and avoided gestures. Diplomats expressed their thoughts in a high standard of language very close to written language. In the case of China, national cultural influences were dominant over the diplomatic subculture: lots of proverbs, metaphors and examples were used throughout the discourse. The South African official also used a very atypical diplomatic code. He expressed his thoughts in populist, easy to understand language. In general, Western and Eastern officials used different means of expression.

REASONING AND JUSTIFICATION IN THE NUCLEAR ARMS ISSUE

Some discourses began with an excuse, apology or justification of why nuclear weapons or a nuclear umbrella is essential for the country. .China stands for the abolition of nuclear weapons, although China is a nuclear-weapons state. We think that the world should be a world free of nuclear weapons ... why we have nuclear weapons, this has historical reasons... As you know, Japan is the only country that suffered from the damage of nuclear weapons ... So we don't want nuclear weapons to exist in the world, but at the same time realistically seen, there are nuclear weapons...India has stood traditionally for nuclear disarmament and belonged to the Non-Aligned Movement ...India's nuclear weapons have to be understood in terms of our security environment... Israel highlighted that there is no official proof of it possessing nuclear weapons. If we have such capability is an assumption that has never been proved... Austria and South Africa underlined from the very beginning the necessity of global nuclear disarmament. France did not use such an argument and simply outlined that nuclear weapons are important to France.

HISTORICAL LEGITIMIZATION

Secondly, a historical explanation was offered in order either to justify the possession of nuclear weapons or to legitimize the present situation: .China is in fact the most non-aligned country from the very beginning ... in the fifties and sixties we were threatened by both the former Soviet Union and the US. ... They were considering whether they were going to use nuclear weapons against China ... China was compelled to develop its own nuclear weapons; Our defence is based on the possession of nuclear weapons because in former times the principle menace came from one big power the Soviet Union. In response France developed a strategy of nuclear deterrence ... to answer with nuclear weapons; We needed a nuclear umbrella in the area of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and the US confronted each other. (Japan)

NUCLEAR WEAPONS AS A REACTION TO THREAT

Related to the historical explanations is the fact that the decision to seek protection through nuclear weapons was a reaction to an outside threat. India exemplifies this position. We have to respond to our security environment ... and the security situation around us. And naturally any country needs to respond to the security environment.

Israel too understands its security policy as a reaction to outer threat: .There is one state . Israel surrounded by several Arab states with huge armies and big arsenals of weapons ... we therefore need strong military capabilities as a deterrent.. South Africa on the contrary has a very different view: Many countries live still in the past, but not in the future. We have been given the chance of creating a new world with a new thinking, our view of the world is new ... the old system of Apartheid viewed the world very differently... No country explained its nuclear arsenal as an offensive policy, but rather as a necessity for defence. Yet if all nuclear countries had to go nuclear because of an outside threat, then a reverse effect could also be possible: nevertheless, this is not so obvious, as explains the Chinese official: Political things are not that simple, citing India as an example. When India developed nuclear weapons they said it was because the other nuclear-weapon states did not disarm, and they particularly mentioned China.... Later on they got nuclear weapons themselves, but China has committed itself never to use nuclear weapons against India. So why did India decide in favour of nuclear weapons?

The real reason? It is not what they say, if you think very carefully. There are some deeper reasons behind: deep power secrets ... whether this is wrong or not, I don't judge... France underlined the fact that all recognized nuclear-weapon states are permanent members of the Security Council.

THE COLD WAR

Nuclear weapons are closely linked to the Cold War. The Cold War came to an end nearly a decade ago, but with the exception of South Africa this époque still strongly influences contemporary arguments and the importance of the nuclear deterrence strategy. ..If you want to deter, the question arises who do you want to deter. France has no declared enemy. So the

nuclear arms are not pointed against any particular target since we do not have an enemy. This is logical, but we live in a dangerous world where new enemies can appear... The repeated references to logic in the French discourse (five times within the interview) seems to be a product of national culture. Austria's defence concept seems equally determined by the experience of the Cold War: We used to maintain the security concept of the high entrance fee... In the case of a confrontation between the Warsaw Pact and NATO, the Austrian concept was to try to stop the enemy as long as possible... As to the present security concept the interior political discussion is not yet able to tell to which degree Austria will join the EU security policy.

NATIONAL IDENTITY, THE ROLE OF THE ARMY AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

When asked to define national identity most representatives referred to a common historical experience, shared values, religion, language and habits. How this self-definition was related to national defence and security doctrines was viewed in different ways: India as a nation is strong, believes in democracy and it has thousands of years of history and civilization. I don't see nuclear weapons in that sense as part of the national identity. It was a reaction to our environment and not because we have a lack of national identity... Here the question was clearly interpreted as to whether India needed nuclear weapons to create national identity. Israel and Japan questioned the connection between security and culture: The security concept of Israel has nothing to do with national identity, which is based on the Bible, the land, 3000 years of history. ... The army is a basic need. It plays a basic role in the integration of society. There are many ethnic groups and there is a division between religious and non-religious groups ... now the army brings all those people together in one framework ... but we are not different from other states, we are a normal society... Here too the question was interpreted in a sense of .being different from others... Japan's statement seemed almost contradictory: .National identity has nothing to do with defence concept; yet later continued, of course, our defence concept is related to how we see the world, but there are given factors around Japan and this has nothing to do with Japan ... we are just defending ourselves, but this has nothing to do with national identity.. France clearly stood out in its reasoning and explanation. The possession of nuclear weapons is not understood as filling a gap in national identity, but the army and nuclear weapons are viewed as an integral part of French culture: It has to be said that France is a country that maintains a certain pride in her army, the fact of having an army, to greet the army on the 14th of July, the French National Day, is something very French... It is related to nationalism in the positive sense, it is the idea of France. I think that there is a strong link between the identity of the country and the possession of nuclear forces ... it is an interactive process.. Nuclear weapons influence national identity even in non-nuclear Austria. Their existence contributes to the creation of national identity in the sense that Austria traditionally stands for pacifism, perceiving its role in the international community as a contributor to nuclear disarmament.

The discourse of South Africa showed a very clear historical division between the pre-1994 era and the present situation. One can hypothesize that the fundamental changes in South African society strongly contributed to a new form of discourse. We are a rainbow nation ... we are proud of having come through a harsh past and almost a rebirth has taken place ... before you had a country against a system. The military was there to protect the system, not the country, to protect the values of the elite. Equally the new South Africa doesn't seek protection in nuclear weapons, since we view the world very differently than did

the old white minority regime. At the end of the interview, the official was asked to describe in his or her own words a postnuclear war scenario. Most representatives had great difficulties in doing so and rather started to explain why this could never happen. Unlike the others, Austria and South Africa answered very directly: .Massive destruction, questioning of human survival on earth, climatic changes, darkness. (Austria); Some kinds of thoughts of basically nothing. (South Africa).

Conclusion

The intention of this article was to show the complexity of communication and terminology and to contribute to a better understanding in discussions on nuclear disarmament. Only by being aware of what a term or phrase means in the cultural context of the interactants is constructive discussion possible and miscommunication might be avoided. This preliminary research shows that the associations and connotations of terminology are very much influenced by a person's cultural and social background, value systems and the worldviews prevailing in his or her country.

There were several similarities in the way the subject was discussed in the interviews. Representatives of nuclear-weapon and nuclear-weapon capable states apologized in a short introduction for the possession of nuclear weapons by their country, gave a historical explanation, stressed that nuclear weapons are an arm of defence and are a reaction to outside threat. Most officials, with the exception of France, did not see a connection between the country's national identity, its defence policy and the nuclear arsenal. Austria's strong anti-nuclear attitude seems to be related to national identity. The South African official viewed the country's nuclear policy as an outcome of its political and social change.

In conclusion, three main points can be noted about the interrelatedness of culture, language and nuclear weapons. First, there is a strong link between language and the culture of nuclear weapons. A Chinese does not speak like a South African, an Austrian does not use the same language as a Frenchman or Israeli. No doubt national culture influences expression, as seen in the repeated references to logic by the French official or the use of metaphors and flourish in Chinese.

Second, it appears that the possession or non-possession of nuclear weapons plays an important role in the cultural identity of the national representatives interviewed, even though the self-perception of the interviewed might not agree with this view. To have or not to have nuclear weapons influences a country's threat perception, self-definition and national identity. In that respect, common historical experience plays an important role. South Africa has experienced that historical circumstances can change given the political will. Most other countries have not gone through that process and reasoning, their arguments are strongly based on a collective past related to the Cold War. In this sense I would even claim that the Cold War forms an integrative part of western culture.

Finally it must be once more pointed out that this preliminary research not only revealed important aspects of each country's national culture, but also of diplomatic culture. Obvious in the subtle mixture of silence and spoken word, each diplomat carefully evaluated what one can say, what one should say and what one has to be silent about.

Notes

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5 Mary Jane Collier and Thomas Milt, *Cultural Identity: An Interpretative Work*, in: Young Kim and William Gudykunst, *Theories in Intercultural Communication*, *International and Intercultural Communication Annual Vol. XII*, London, Sage, 1988, p. 112.

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8 Pertti Joenniemi, *Decoding Nuclear Winter: Has War Lost its Name?* *Current Research on Peace and Violence; War, Peace and Culture*, No. 10/1, 1987, p. 24.

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10 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge*, Paris, Tavistock, 1971;

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